

A NOTE ON VELU TAMPI'S REBELLION

By

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VELU Tampi was the typical strongman of his times. When vested in his own person he had a salutary respect for authority. For weakness and incompetence he had nothing but contempt. A rebel by instinct, he knew how to work upon popular passions. His first revolt brought him to power but the second wrought his ruin. Yet his worst enemy could not attribute his discomfiture to lack of daring or enterprise. To yoke his willing confrere of Cochin was perhaps not so difficult but Velu Tampi tried and all but succeeded in rallying all the discontented elements under his own leadership and looked across the seas for an ally whose prowess had proved more than equal to that of the British in the battlefields of Europe. It was not his fault that the expected succour from the French islands never arrived. The story of his insurrection told so well by Wilson (*History of India*) and V. Nagam Aiya (*Travancore State Manual*) need not be repeated here; but we may rescue from oblivion a narrative which Col. Daly left of what may rightly be described as Velu Tampi's last parleys with a British Officer. It shows the redoubtable Dewan at his best and worst. Col. Daly

commanded the Carnatic Brigade which stood so staunchly by the Dewan, and knew him well. The narrative that follows was written for the information of Col. Macaulay, the Resident and was transmitted by him to the Acting Chief Secretary of the Government of Fort St. George.

Daly's Account

"You will recollect that your writer in company with me left your House at Cochin on the 26th December about eight O'clock at night for Alleppi, where we arrived next morning about the same hour and immediately waited upon the Dewan to whom I delivered your letter. He appeared highly pleased with the contents and instantly ordered Palpanapoolah, his late Secretary to make out a letter of resignation for him, which letter was to be delivered to the Colonel for the purpose of forwarding to the Rajah. Your writer requested a copy of this letter, which he said was requisite for the satisfaction of the Colonel. I should have observed that on our way to the Cutchree I desired your writer to inform the Dewan that it was the Colonel's order for me to return with

1. Sec. Cons., 10 April, 1893, No. 3.

him, which he did, but the Dewan hastily answered there was no necessity for that as he wished me to accompany himself. I was struck with the manner of his reply and instantly said that I had made the same observation to the Colonel at Cochin, and that he said. It was very well, my reason for this was to do away any suspicion the Dewan may harbour. We then enquired at what time he would be ready to depart, he answered the next evening about eight or nine O'clock so that the Colonel may expect him at Cochin early the morning following. At the same time he desired the writer to request of the Colonel to order two Palinquins one for himself and the other for me. I observed that two Palinquins would not be sufficient as his Brother Tomby would want one, he answered Tomby and Palpanapoolah must manage for themselves as well as they can. He then added that it would be proper for the Colonel to order four Guards with a Jemadar to await our arrival at Cranganore as it was possible his own people may do him injury on the way when they discovered his flight, all which the writer promised to mention to the Colonel. We then took leave & ca. On the evening of the same day I waited on the Dewan and found him seated in greater state than usual surrounded by a number of the Head people such as Valia

Sarwadies and Sarwadies. I observed the Pepper Sarwady Palpanapoolah was not present. The Dewan after some short time desired I would go home as he was then a little busy, that there was no occasion for me to come next morning but to come in the evening. I was surprised at this, and desired my linguist to speak in his ear (?) (many people being present) and enquire what he meant by what he said just now as he knew very well the time was precious and Colonel Macaulay would be expecting him at Cochin agreeable to his promise. He answered that the day tomorrow was not a good day, but to come in the evening and he would inform me the time to a certainty. Accordingly the following evening about seven O'clock I waited on him when he soon dispatched me saying, tomorrow evening about nine O'clock we shall take our departure, take care to have your Boat & ca. in readiness at that hour. Accordingly on the 29th in the evening about seven O'clock I waited on him having previously made ready my Boat imagining he would to a certainty set off the same night. On seeing me he inquired if I was ready, I replied that all was ready according to his desire—he then asked me when do you propose to depart. I answered, I only wait your orders—he then asked me if I truly and sincerely trusted in Colonel Macaulay's

promises to him, I answered that I trusted most sincerely and so much so that I would answer with my life for Colonel Macaulay's faithfully fulfilling every engagement or promise made him upon this occasion.—He then said, when I go to Cranganore will the Colonel not do me any harm. I answered, certainly not, I have a brace of loaded pistols by me and should sooner shoot myself with one of them than advise you to the step if I had the least suspicion of Colonel Macaulay's doing you harm, on the contrary he will, I am certain, treat you with honor and respect. What then does Colonel Macaulay certainly believe that I shall come there, was his reply. I answered most certainly.—Oh he is a fool was the answer, I thought he was a man of sense but I find he has no sense, he trusts to my writing and promises. I am the Minister of Travancore, how could Colonel Macaulay suppose that I would leave my King and Country to live in the Company's Territories. Was I to do so, I would be looked upon as a traitor by my own King and Cast and at the same time despised by the English Government. Therefore I now tell you I shall never quit my Country to please Colonel Macaulay. The Colonel wishes my departure very much, I am certain, as in that case he would assume all power and authority over the Country. He wrote me to discharge the Carnatick Brigade, I will not discharge that

Brigade. I shall raise five Battalions more and immediately make war against the Company. I answered if you pretend to make war against the Company you will lose your life. the Rajah, his Country and the Poor Inhabitants will be ruined and destroyed—he then said I have a lack and fifty thousand Men and Marhattas are at war with the Company and the French and Russians are on their way through Persia and will be in this Country very soon, therefore the Company have no Force at hand to bring against this place; besides I have written and sent people to the Polegars and Moplas from Madura to Cananore who are all to a man ready to join when I commence the War. I answered the Company has taken all India, Travancore excepted, therefore their power is everywhere. Whoever has informed you of a Marhatta War and that the French and Russians arrived at Persia, were very wrong as there is not a word of truth in it, and you may be assured the Polygars are not such fools as to join with you, they know the Company's power and resources too well for that. Therefore, I now assure you that in the course of fifteen or twenty days the Companys army will arrive by land and sea and soon possess themselves of this Country, and you will most certainly lose your life—he replied it is a custom to make war and afterwards to make a peace,

therefore I am determined to begin a war. I replied what you say is in some measure true, but believe me if you begin the War the Company will never make peace with you—He then said I want to make war, get a name and then die. I then asked him why did you send me so often to Colonel Macaulay to try to conclude this business in an amicable way if you had all this in your heart—he replied I did so to gain time to prepare myself—I then observed I trusted your word and took a great deal of trouble in this affair, what must Colonel Macaulay think of me now, upon which he replied, oh Colonel Macaulay's business is all done to-day, his Head is kicking about the streets of Cochin by this time. Upon which, somewhat disconcerted of course, I said, then Dewan I suppose you reserve the same fate for me, I believed your going according to your promise to Colonel Macaulay, but it seems you have deceived him as well as me, the last time I went to Cochin I took all my money and left it at Colonel Macaulay's House which will be plundered by your people of course, now I have lost my word, I have lost my money, and I suppose you will take my life, and all this in consequence of placing so much confidence in you—he then said I shall do you no harm, you must go and remain prisoner at your House. I should have said that I had before refused to

join the Brigade—he then asked how much money did you take to Cochin. I replied about twelve thousand Rupees, you shall not lose that money was the reply, I shall give you my Bond on the circular account for the twelve thousand rupees payable on demand with the interest of eight per cent. until paid. I immediately answered I will receive no Bond or anything else from you on any account, spare my life that is all the favour I ask at present, and I instantly left his presence. I certainly expected to be murdered before I should reach my own House, I however waited in the outside Cutcharee until he came out which was shortly after, and then saluted him, upon which he gave me his Hand telling me not to be afraid, I however had lost all confidence in him—the same moment the Brigade marched off and the Dewan joined them in his Palinqueen. I then returned to my House where I found he had sent the Bond.

To the best of my recollection this is the purport of what passed between the Dewan and me from the 27th December 1808 until the 29th Decr."

Unflinching Courage

If Daly is to be believed, Velu Tampi hoped to bring about an anti-British alliance of the principal Malabar States with the French and the Marathas. Chimerical as the scheme may now appear it was not entirely

impracticable. The Marathas were still smarting under their recent discomfiture and had not yet been reconciled to their subordinate status. There was no lack of disaffection among the Moplas and Nayers and France was at open war with Britain. A Maratha-Malabar combination backed by France might very well succeed where Travancore and Cochin failed. Velu Tampi had French officers on whom he could rely. Two Frenchmen, Captains La Fobi and Alaire, served in the Carnatic Brigade and we learn from Col. Macaulay that two sons of the former and a near relative of the latter had taken an active part in Velu Tampi's rebellion.² As early as the 11th September the Resident had noticed with unconcealed concern the presence of French sailors serving in Arab vessels at Aleppi.³ On the 16th December he reported to Mr. Buchan that two Mahomedans had been despatched by the Dewan to Mauritius on a Maldivian vessel to solicit a reinforcement of 500 Artillery, and Col. Macaulay believed that "the Govt. of the French Islands could in security run over to Aleppi as many troops as they might be disposed to send," as "the Port of Alleppi may be entered in the midst of the heaviest monsoon gales".⁴ On the 21st of December he wrote — "Every one is told that the French and Marathas are to assist the Ram Rajah".⁵ Velu Tampi had evidently

received exaggerated reports of French success in Europe and there was persistent rumour about early arrival of a French force in Malabar but there is no evidence that he ever opened any negotiation with any of the disgruntled Maratha chiefs. There is no reason, however, to discredit Daly's report; he had nothing to gain by fabricating a false story after the rebellion had been completely suppressed. Col. Daly and Major Hamilton were the only officers of the Carnatic Brigade who did not join the rebels and were therefore sure of the pension promised by the Company's government. Though the insurrection of 1808-9 proved a dismal failure, Daly's narrative goes far to prove that Velu Tampi could plan on a grand scale and was not an indifferent student of current politics, although he was sadly misinformed about European and Indian affairs. However strongly we may condemn his misdeeds, we cannot but admire the unflinching courage that sustained him till the last moment and enabled him to make his final exit in a manner worthy of the best traditions of his land.

2. Col. Macaulay's letter, dated 11th March 1809 (Secret Cons. 10th April, 1808, No. 3).

3. Secret Consultation, 2nd Jan'y. 1809, No. 37.

4. Secret Consultation, 23rd Jan'y. 1809, No. 33.

5. Secret Consultation 23rd Jan'y. 1809, No. 37.